DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 928 HE 029 933

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TITLE Older Women in the Academy: Games We Learn To Play Coping with Systems of Inequity.
PUB DATE 8 Nov 96
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Montreal, Canada, November 8, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Administrator Attitudes; *Adult Students; *Coping; Equal Education; Family Work Relationship; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Paying for College; Sex Bias; *Social Support Groups; *Student Adjustment; Student Characteristics; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Assistants; *Womens Education

ABSTRACT

This critical qualitative study explored the obstacles older women encounter as they pursue doctorates. Introductory material identifies steps in a critical qualitative approach including monological data collection, preliminary reconstructive analysis, dialogical data generation, and description and explanation of system relationships. Four women (ages 34 to 44) working on their dissertations in a doctoral program in educational administration were interviewed. Women identified such obstacles as: (1) lack of emotional support; (2) lack of financial support; and (3) a power structure that legitimizes marginalization of graduate students, particularly women and minorities. More specifically, participants interpreted the lack of emotional support as marginalization of women and lessening of their worth and perceived the 2-year limit on teaching assistantships as differentially impacting women financially since women often take longer than average to complete degrees due to family responsibilities and a greater relative burden from student loans. (Contains 24 references.) (JLS)

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ED 404 928

# Older Women in the Academy: Games We Learn to Play

## Coping With Systems of Inequity

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Presented at
AESA
Montreal, Canada
November 8, 1996

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# Prelude

**The Facts:**

- Women have constituted 51% of the total population since 1960.

- Women now receive 56% of all associate's degrees, 51% of all bachelor's degrees, 50% of all master's degrees and 35% of all doctoral degrees, but they are not yet fully represented throughout the range of possible fields.

- The return on a college education differs greatly for women and for men. In 1987, the median salary for men with 4 years of *high school* ($25,394) was higher the median salary earned by women with 4 years of *college* ($23,406).

- Women age 35 and older represent the fastest growing group of college students; their number tripled between 1972 and 1985.

- In 1986, women received more than one-half of the doctorates awarded in seven fields: English, French, Spanish, **education**, anthropology, and psychology.

- Although the numbers increased between 1975 and 1985, the proportion of women faculty remained steady at just over one-fourth of the total and the percentage of these women faculty who are minorities has remained at 12%.

- In both public and private institutions, the proportion of women faculty (all ranks combined) is lowest in universities and highest in 2-year institutions.

- The percentage of women at the rank of full professor has changed very little over the last 13 years. In 1986, 12% of all full professors were women, a figure only slightly higher than the 1973 figure of 10%.

Touchton, J. G. and Davis, L. (1991). Fact book on women in higher education. American Council on Education. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

**Abstract**

This paper is an in-depth qualitative study of four of the eight women in an administration program in a university in the Pacific Northwest. The purpose is to increase the knowledge base about older female students by exploring the obstacles these women encounter as they pursue doctorates and what mechanisms, if any, they use to overcome the obstacles encountered. It was found that older women come into the academy with extensive background experiences that they perceive are marginalized and discounted as they pursue the doctorate into educational administration. Some of the barriers the women experienced include: (a) lack of emotional support which is seen as marginalizing their work experience and their worth to the program; (b) lack of financial support - none of the women were able to complete the program in their desired time frames, given family and other commitments; and (c) a power structure that legitimizes marginalization of graduate students, particularly women and minorities. Committed to their goal of completing the doctoral program, these women employ different techniques to minimize these detrimental effects. One woman resigns to the fact that she cannot change the system and will be finished soon. Another seeks support from outside the department. Still another uses family support. Each woman has learn to play games in order to cope with the inequities within the academy.

**Methodology**

A critical qualitative approach has been used in this study. According to Carspecken and Apple (1992), the critical approach distinguishes itself from other approaches in that the research is driven from the beginning by a set of concerns or questions that a researcher has derived by a particular orientation they hold. This "orienting theory" (Whyte, 1984) is the primary force behind the

individual's desire to do the research formulation of questions for inquiry. Typically, the research is motivated by concerns of inequity and relationships involving human activity, culture, and political structures.

The five steps employed in a critical qualitative approach are (1) monological data collection, (2) preliminary reconstructive analysis, (3) dialogical data generation, (4) describing system relationships, and (5) explaining system relationships (Carspecken and Apple, 1992). This research is indicative of the previous steps with some variation. Steps' one and two that include observation and construction of a preliminary analysis was performed outside the scope of this actual study. This researcher has had classes with, had done projects with, and had formed peer as well as personal relationships with the women involved in the study. In the context of conversations about their trials and tribulations of pursuing their degrees, the question kept reappearing as to why the system appeared to be inflexible in regard to these individuals? Step three included the writing of interview questions to ascertain the links between these students and the system of graduate school. Describing the system relationships and explaining those system relationships (steps' four and five) are discussed in detail later in this paper. However in general, the system is seen as being characterized by a line that emerges between professors and graduate students resulting in a felt power relationship by the graduate students.

Finally when discussing power relationships and gender, one cannot avoid using feminist theory in an attempt to further explain the complexity of those relationships. Using women's experiences, recent literature has focused on specific groups of women, tenured women faculty of the academe (Henry, 1990), pre-service teacher training (Catalano & Tillie, 1991), the stigma of women administrators (Martin, 1993), and the chilly atmosphere of educational administration programs for women (Epp, 1994). Common to all these studies is

the politics of gender that creates distrust, disempowerment and coping strategies. This study focuses on the fastest growing group in college, the women 35 years and older, to give yet another perspective of women's struggles.

Currently, there are seventeen women enrolled in the education leadership program who live in the area of the university studied. Of those seventeen, seven women are part-time (taking a class or two here and there) and one is working on a master's degree. Of the nine that are left, the researcher is one leaving eight possible subjects. Four of the eight were selected using the criteria of age and their status within the program. All four have passed their prelims and are currently working on their dissertations. Their ages range from 34 to 44.

**Introduction**

The only land grant university in its state, Unforgettable University is most noted for its programs in veterinary medicine, pharmacy, communications, and engineering. Nestled in an agricultural area, Unforgettable U is isolated from the interference of "the big city." The university and the city of Pleasantville that borders it combine for a total population of 24,360. With the university enrollment at approximately 16,000 students, town residency remains at a little over 8,000. Although removed from large-scale urban problems such as gangs, Pleasantville still has its own unique set of stereotypes to overcome. One problem many students observe is the slow pace in which local residents embrace change and new ideas. Pleasantville is still a predominately white monoculture encompassing the ideals of small town Americana.

The education department at Unforgettable University is one of two institutions in the state approved for offering a doctoral program in educational administration. Other advanced degrees offered within the College of Education

include areas in teaching and learning, counseling psychology, educational psychology, sports management and kinesiology and leisure studies. The dean of the college has always been male as well as the chair of Education Administration, now renamed due to restructuring within the university. Traditionally, most of the professors have been male, but with the hiring last year of two more female professors, the number of female instructors is three. One is tenured, but none are full professors as of yet.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Three theories are integrated to form the theoretical framework upon which the discussion and the analysis of this research are based. Symbolic interaction acknowledges the importance of dialog as viewed from the perspective of the women. Gaming theory is used to examine the strategies of coping, while feminist theory is applied to the analysis of the system structures that exposes the need for change.

*Symbolic Interaction*

Historically, the term socialization has been used to denote the conformity and adaptation of an individual. This view of socialization is from the perspective of the society or group that seeks to socialize its new members as the means by which to perpetuate itself. Therefore, individuals are socialized to conform to role expectations, to the opinions of others, and to the norms and values of the society or group (Gecas, 1981). Socialization occurs in different contexts. The most noted contexts of socialization in society include the family, school and the work setting.

School, though its primary mission is the cognitive development of the student, is an entity that requires the use of symbols for organizational purposes. These symbols appear in four forms: (1) stories communicate the norms and

values of an organization and defines its culture; (2) ritualized events which as activities stylize or formalize patterns; (3) specialized language which develops an organizational identity; and (4) material manifestation such as logos or award as visual signs of the characteristics of the organization (Vaughan, 1995). The symbols of the organization serve to socialize the individual into the culture of the organization through conformity and commitment to the norms and values of that organization. However, as Hewitt (1976) points out, there is variation in the ways which members attend to, respond to, and act upon the environment in which they are located. Therefore, socialization must be a dynamic process of interaction by which individuals can interpret and add personalized meanings to the symbols of the organization.

Symbolic interaction is a term coined by Herbert Blumer based upon ideas on self and society by G. H. Mead. Blumer (1969) describes the three basic tenants of symbolic interaction as: (1) humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; (2) the meanings of things derive from social interaction; and (3) these meanings are dependent upon, and modified by, and interpretive process of the interactants. In short, things have meaning based upon the action it elicits. The process is interactive and interpretive according to the meanings' symbols or words have for the interactant. Within a culture, the meanings associated with various words or symbols have the general feeling of agreement. Where there is a high consensus, the meaning of a symbol is clear; however, it consensus is low, the meaning of the symbol is ambiguous (Gecas, 1986). Where symbols are ambiguous, interaction or communication is hindered and interpretation of those symbols becomes highly variable by interactants.

In this research, each woman describes the interpretation she has of the symbols of the doctoral program in educational administration. Symbols of the culture include what a graduate student should be, how a graduate student

should act, what activities a graduate student should be involved in and what are the rewards given to those students who uphold the graduate student ideal. Each woman examines how she measures up to the norms of the organization, thereby interpreting her worth as a graduate student which in turn marginalizes her experiences.

*Gaming Theory*

The games metaphor is an attempt to reconcile the organization with its norms and values with the individual that must compete with others for position within the organization. The graduate school in educational administration is a structured competition, with its own rules, its own winners and losers, and an audience (the faculty) which keeps score and responds to particularly adept or inept play. Successful players receive additional resources and faculty time. Winning is dependent upon the interpretation of the symbols that the organization has displayed, thus, interaction is an integral part of the game.

Game theory is an approach of how rational individuals will act in conflict situations to achieve their preferred objectives (Firestone, 1989). Although conflict is basic to human existence and growth, it occurs in different arenas of interaction. These arenas of interaction are person to person, person to group, or group to group. The most frustrating conflict occurs within the person to group interaction. This conflict can be described as the discrepancy between group expectations and the individual (Hatch, 1984). In the case of this research, women developed alternative strategies to mitigate the perceived conflict between graduate school expectations and their role as a graduate student. This circumvention of the game rules left the women feeling unsupported emotionally and financially.

*Feminist Theory*

Feminist theory provides a critique of existing social inequalities and is capable of providing analysis of specific lived in cultural and social relations. Feminist theory is also capable of a critique of material conditions that may contribute to social transformation and political transformation as well as critical scholarship (Roman, 1992). There are three central concepts of feminist theory: (1) empowerment; (2) community; and (3) leadership. Feminist pedagogy views empowerment as a concept of energy, capacity and potential rather than as domination; communities that are reconceptualized to include individuality of its members who share a sense of relationship and connectedness with each other and leadership as the ability and willingness to act on out beliefs (Shrewsbury, 1993).

The purpose of this paper is to add to the knowledge base of older women in the academy through the obstacles they perceive and the strategies they develop to overcome those obstacles. Hindrances the women identify deal with marginalization and a power system that legitimizes that marginalization, feminist theory is the overarching theory used to analyze the system structures.

**Silhouettes**

The following is a brief summary introducing the four individuals in the study to the reader. Their names have been changed as well as any detailed information that might lead to their identity. Since changes have been made from the actual field notes, care has been given not to lose the accuracy of the individual's descriptions and experiences.

*Amy* is the youngest individual interviewed at thirty-four. Her delightful sense of humor draws others into conversation with her. Amy has had previous mentors that she describes as influential people in powerful positions. They

taught her to take risks, not to be afraid to look stupid, not to take herself too seriously and to always be kind. Her parents instilled in her a belief that she can do anything; she exudes confidence.

A first generation college graduate, Amy's credentials include a bachelor's degree in history, a master's degree in public administration and work experience in higher education on and off for the past fifteen years. She is currently "all but dissertation" in education administration. She feels that her special contribution to the field of higher education will be a better sense of who college students are. She adds that we can do all the surveys, all the questionnaires and all the statistical crunching we want, but what administrators need to have is on going empowering dialog and assessment. "If you don't have communication with them, you are going to miss the boat alot. They are not products, they are people."

*Jo* is forty-three years old. She was born and lived the first eighteen years of her life in a different country than the United States; English is her second language. Jo is thoughtful and quiet. When she feels she can trust you, her smile and sense of humor blossoms. In the early 1980s, Jo started working in her son's kindergarten class. At the age of thirty-two, Jo went back to school for her teaching certificate and has taught at the secondary level. Her decision to get a doctorate was based upon the ideal of wanting to make a difference. Jo wanted to be a role model for the rest of women in society due to the fact that she herself is a non-traditional student; she wants women to know that it is never too late to better yourself. Jo's decision to attend Unforgettable University over the other university in the state that offered an advanced degree in education administration was because of her daughter. She visited the city near the other university. Jo observed the activities in the high school parking lots of both cities. Subsequently, Jo chose to live in Pleasantville because she felt it was best

for her daughter. Besides, she humorously adds, I liked the university's colors. Growing up in two cultures, Jo believes she will bring an international quality to education leadership.

*Liz* , at thirty-nine, is a "self-made" woman. She is strong, confident and can take care of herself. Liz worked, paid for and supported herself throughout her undergraduate program. She taught twelve years in the K-12 system and started a master's program in California only to quit and follow her "then" husband up to Unforgettable University so he could attend vet school. Liz took a staff job at the university thinking she would be able to take advantage of the staff waiver and pursue a doctorate in education administration. However, she was unable to obtain the fee waiver and for the first two to three years of her doctoral program, Liz was the sole wage earner in the family. When her husband finished vet school, it was understood that it would be her turn to attend college full time. That broken promise subsequently lead Liz and her husband to divorce. Currently, Liz speaks of a wonderful, supportive partner and is working on her dissertation and principal's credentials. Although Liz believes that there are no new ideas anywhere, she feels that if she can positively influence the next few crops of pre-service teachers to be the absolute best teachers by sharing her experiences then she will have contributed something.

*Meg* is an incredible story teller. She has a rich heritage of how her grandmother, mother and sister have overcome adversities in their lives. Meg's mother was the eldest of six children when her own mother (Meg's grandmother) had to scrub floors at the age of thirty-six to support the children after her husband had died of tuberculosis. This lesson taught Meg's mother how important it was to educate your girls as well as your boys because there is no guarantee that your girls will not lose their husbands. This has been a very strong family value that has been instilled in both girls. Meg's sister is a lawyer

and Meg is currently working on her dissertation. Meg's mother not only has supported this value emotionally with the girls, but financially as well.

Meg's credentials include a bachelor's in business and a master's in higher education. During the last two years of her bachelor's degree, Meg started working in the residence halls and while pursuing her master's, she was a hall director. When Meg came to Unforgettable University, she spent the first two years as a hall director moving up to an area coordinator. Later, she worked for the vice-provost creating a new student and parent orientation program for Unforgettable University. Meg was twenty-eight years old when she started working for the vice-provost and marvels at the tremendous power she had. Three and a half years later, an ulcer, and a new husband, Meg began her doctoral program in education administration with a focus in higher education. Meg has lived in residence halls for eight years observing what students like, what they don't like, how they manage things and how they deal with things. Her contribution to the field is a gift for understanding students.

Three out of the four women in this study are divorced and must support themselves. One out of the three divorcees has a daughter in high school living with her. The woman who is married has a husband, who is also in graduate school, and one small child at home.

**Voices From the Field**

All the women interviewed have had vast experiences dealing with the public as well as having succeeded in school as students themselves. The domains of hindrance they have identified are lack of support emotionally, lack of support financially, and a power structure that supports classism.

Issue: *Lack of emotional support*
Lack of emotional support is viewed by the women as marginalization of their worth to the program

Amy The feeling I'm not a legitimate student because I was part-time (Amy was working for the university to support herself while attending school).

Liz My committee dissolving due to one faculty member being removed from graduate faculty status without my knowledge and without his; my committee chair also resigned.

Meg (in the context of being a graduate teaching assistant) I walked by the faculty every single day for two years, four semesters, and never felt like I developed an extra relationship in anyway, even being located on the same floor with them. You know I might say hello or hi, but the faculty doesn't reach out.

Jo It's just you have to overcome your own emotions and your own conflict within yourself.

Issue: *Lack of financial support*
The educational leadership program at Unforgettable University only provides some students with teaching assistantships for a period of two years. Due to the constraints of the program requirements, none were able to finish the program within a two years' time frame due to other commitments. Also, the women are concerned about the student loans they must pay back after completing their degrees.

Amy I did almost all my degree part-time, while I was working. So, I did receive the staff break for taking courses. But when I needed to do my year of residency, I quit my job and committed to doing the whole graduate student thing "the right way". I became a work study student and I also have a couple of Stafford loans. I will be in debt after this.

Liz The first 2-3 years of my Ph.D. program, I was the sole wage earner working outside of the department. I am five years into the process. This part year I have had a teaching assistantship that has put me in a better position to socialize with the faculty (which hasn't happened) and my peers. This decision cost me monetarily as is was a cut in pay.

Meg They put a statement out that they were only going to support you for two years and past that point then, of course, new TA's rotate in. I understand that that is a great recruitment tool, but where do we go, what do we do, what opportunities are there around? I've seen some people that were able to create some different things in the department, but I think many people have had to struggle as they get to the third and fourth year, especially when you're place bound and there aren't a lot of opportunities even within the community.

Jo Finance is a difficult area because all graduate students are way under the poverty line and I wish things were different. I want to learn, I want to study, I want to teach, but I want to live too. Although I have a teaching assistantship, I need to teach at the high school to help support my daughter. It is sorta overdoing it a bit, but it pays the bills.

Issue: *A power system that legitimizes the marginalization of graduate students*
Since teaching assistants are required as part of their contract agreement to attend departmental and college meetings conflict arises when the meeting scheduled is the same time as the class to be taught. Taking the responsibility to meet the requirement of teaching your class has not been an acceptable excuse for missing meetings.

Liz Oppressive and classist administrators who do not treat graduate students very well. We are **required** to attend unimportant and trivial meetings that ignore our basic mission that is to improve instruction and enhance student learning. These meetings are highly politicized and are geared towards indoctrination which is the antithesis of what a university mission stands for.

Meg Meg openly states at the beginning of our interview that she "may limit her responses due to her priority of obtaining a degree while not alienating the existing power structure".

Jo Politics, university politics. Especially when the top honcho has his or her own way and everybody adheres to it, there's no winning. I mean you just have to learn to bend over.

**Coping with systems of inequities**

Each woman has developed mechanisms to cope with what they perceive are systems of inequities. The first and foremost coping mechanism of these women is the ability to focus in on and to retain their goal of a Ph.D. in the face of indignity.

*Coping with lack of emotional support*

Amy credits the support she has received from her chair and appreciates what he has brought to her studies. Amy also has and has had a terrific

boyfriend who just finished a Ph.D. program last year; "there is little in my life right now that doesn't connect to getting it (my dissertation) done." About feeling illegitimate as a graduate student due to the interpretation that you are not really committed, Amy interjects that "the more successes in the program you have the less likely you are apt to believe that people are thinking that you don't know what the hell you are talking about. So, you build confidence and that's how you get over it"

Liz has sought most of her emotional support from outside the department. The most convincing evidence of her alienation is the fact that half of her committee is from outside of the College of Education. Liz makes no pretensions: "if they won't support me, I will go to where they do".

Meg feels that her mother and sister have been her biggest supporters. Besides her mother instilling the importance for education, Meg says it's been her sister who has been the steadiest through her life. "She is incredible; she's been a doer. She just really has been a model at whatever you want you should go after."

Jo admits she really doesn't have mentors. She thought she had one, but says the politics of the department created a rift between them. "I have friends I can bitch with, but that doesn't solve anything. It makes me feel better, but I wish things were different". Jo's support comes from her friends.

*Coping with lack of financial support*

Amy and Liz chose to work full time and attend school as time and money allowed. When they were required to attend full time to fulfill the residency requirement, Liz received a teaching assistantship while Amy obtained work study and student loans. Meg and Jo had a two year teaching assistantship that

was not sufficient for them to finish their doctorates. Jo teaches at the high school and Meg receives financial help from her mother.

*Coping with a power structure that marginalizes*

The power structure of the department is the arena in which all the women do not feel volitional and feel powerless to change the system. Of all the mechanisms Amy, Liz, Meg and Jo employ none come from inside the College of Education itself. Amy (you build confidence with your successes) and Jo (you have to overcome your own emotions and conflict within yourself) choose to become internally focused. Liz (I find my support from outside the college) and Meg (my support comes from my family) seek solutions from others outside the department. It is clear that there is a power structure that fails to address the needs and concerns of these women.

**Conclusions**

Critical theory interprets power relations in terms of race, class, gender, and the role education systems play in reproducing the status quo (McLaren, 1989; Ginzburn, 1988; and Dunlap & Goldman, 1990). Feminist theory defines power in terms of community and connectedness as defined as interdependence of thought and belief (Dunlap, 1990; Munro, 1990; and Shrewbury, 1987). As described by the subjects, there appears to be a lack of relationship and connectedness prevalent with the doctoral program in educational administration. Current program paradigms have not allowed the voice and needs of older female graduate students to be heard. There exists a power structure that these women believe they are not a part of and they can not change it. Consequently, they employ a game of coping strategies to compete within the department while maintaining focus on their goal instead of the inequities.

Organizations are a construction and by themselves they are not gender sensitive; the intent of schools is not to elevate one gender or one culture over another. However, within any organization lies a power structure that determines through its use of symbols the direction the organizational culture will develop (Vaughn, 1995). It is within these power structures gender stratification occurs. An examination of the organizational culture leads to an analysis of the organization (Smircich, 1983) and subsequently, an exposure of the power structure.

In the case of Unforgettable University, the power structure is marginalizing to women. As feminist theory suggests, the women do not feel the ability to act with independence of thought or belief. There is a lack of community and collegiality within the culture that causes these women to feel their degree is in jeopardy if they are different from the projected symbol of what a graduate student should be and act. Who is viewed as receiving mentoring through shared research projects, shared publications, and shared conference presentations with professors further complicates the symbol of what a graduate student is. At Unforgettable University, the graduate student symbol is perceived to be a full-time male student with no other obligations beyond graduate school except perhaps a wife who supports him and makes no demands. It is through the relationship with professors that the rewards and mentoring come. This is the evidence of winning the game and having a premiere vita. Although none of the women believe that this is intended, the culture suggests that women are not as valuable causing alienation and resulting in finding support outside of the department.

The culture reflects the image the power structure is projecting. In examining the power structure, it is men who have the power (the dean of the college and the chair of the department are both men, as well as the majority of

faculty). These women are in an organization that projects a status quo of the power structure. For the culture to change, the power structure must examine the perceptions they have and the symbols they are communicating with.

**Limitations**

This study was conducted in a specific place, at a specific time with a specific group of individuals. While this may appear to be a very narrow in scope, it is just one more piece of a larger picture. Thorne (1994) depicts how children segregate themselves in school and how power determines who will dominate the larger portion of the playground. In their research, Sadker and Sadker (1995) expose the promotion of boys over girls within the school system. Holland and Eisenhart (1990) longitudinally depict the achievement and professional goals of many women in college to become secondary to the needs of men and romance. Patricia McBroom (1992) refers to the new professional woman as the third sex. The third sex is referring to women who are breaking out of the second class citizenship role society has placed them in. In her research, women are beginning to take on high ranking roles in finance. These traditional male roles come with consequences such as divorce and no children. The power structure of the organization only allows success for women if they take on the characteristics of men. As a consequence, many women become divorced or elect not to have children. Women's talents become marginalized because they are coerced to be men to succeed. Organizational power and culture have historically marginalized women and their roles in society. Although this study may appear narrow in scope, it helps to inform a larger cultural issue of our society that is seen to be marginalizing women.

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